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SUBJECT: HUDDLED MASSES ON THE BORDER: TIJUANA'S MIGRANT COMMUNITY

¶1. SUMMARY: Tijuana is a magnet for migrants and is dotted with shelters serving those who have either tried, and failed, to cross illegally into the United States or, more commonly, those that have been recently deported or repatriated. NGOs that work with migrants report an increase in deportations in 2008 and decrease in the number arriving from other Mexican states to attempt the journey. Few migrants attempt to cross in the Tijuana/San Diego corridor anymore, but try the crossing several miles to the east near Tecate, where the border fence ends, paying upwards of USD\$1500 to traffickers for the three-day journey through the desert. Almost none of the deported migrants who show up in Tijuana shelters are from the area and most face an unwelcome reception. The majority stay only temporarily before attempting the journey again. Few choose to return to their home states. The federal government has promised assistance to border states for departed migrants, but very little assistance has trickled down to those in Tijuana's shelters. END SUMMARY

THE MELTING POT

¶2. Nobody is originally from Tijuana. Well, almost nobody (or at least nobody will actually admit to it). Ask any random group of people on the street here and most will reply they are from Sinaloa, Michoacan, Sonora, or another far-off Mexican state. Ask cab drivers or street vendors and many may also tell you how they used to live in Los Angeles or San Diego, and ended up in Tijuana after being deported or repatriated. This isn't surprising for a booming border town. The state of Baja California has attracted thousands of migrants in the last decade coming to work in the city's nearly 600 maquila factories. In addition, the area attracts those using it as a staging ground to cross either legally or (more usually) illegally into the United States and deportees trying to figure out their next move.

¶3. Tijuana has a number of charitable shelters to serve this community of migrants. Most shelters provide a bed, blankets, food, and toiletries, and some also provide social and health services. Only two or three years ago, most of the shelters were filled with U.S.-bound migrants, waiting for a trafficker or "pollero" to take them across. However, Salvador Vargas, assistant director of the Salvation Army Shelter in the Libertad neighborhood of Tijuana, says that fewer and fewer of these would-be migrants are showing up from the south of Mexico, probably due to a combination of poorer job prospects in the U.S., greater numbers of deportations, and a more difficult journey across since construction of the infamous "muro". Now, rather than new arrivals from the south of Mexico, his shelter is packed with those recently deported or repatriated from the U.S. Demand often exceeds supply for shelter in Tijuana. When the Salvation Army's eighty-eight beds are filled, and no other spaces can be found at any of the other city shelters, they simply set up bedding on the floor.

¶4. Shelter employees encourage those deported or repatriated to contact family in their home states and will even help arrange transportation for them to return, but only a few choose this option. Many of them arrive in Tijuana after spending many years in the U.S. and will stay in Tijuana only long enough to save up money to cross again. Father Luiz Kendziernski, who runs Tijuana's largest migrant shelter, the Casa de Migrante, estimates that about half the migrants he sees will attempt the journey again as soon as they have the money, another twenty or thirty percent will try to scrape together a living in Tijuana,

at least temporarily, and the rest will return to their home states. Francisco, a recent arrival at the shelter from the state of Mexico told poloff he was already trying to return home after attempting the journey once and getting discouraged by its difficulty. His friend, who was voluntarily repatriated after a year in the United States, also said he was trying to go back home. But both said they would probably be back in Tijuana in a year or so to try the journey again in cooler weather. Carlos, a volunteer at the Salvation Army Shelter not far from the Casa de Migrante, is himself a deportee, after twenty years working illegally in the U.S., and is one of those who chose to stay in Tijuana rather than risk another journey. He says most of the migrants are too embarrassed to return to family in their home states empty handed, but at the same time, do not know anyone in Baja California. So, most will wait for relatives or friends still in the U.S. to send money or pick up odd jobs in Tijuana to pay another pollero. Baja California has plenty of employment in its maquilas, but these jobs are generally out of reach for deportees who usually lack necessary Mexican paperwork for a formal sector job.

SO MUCH FOR MEXICAN HOSPITALITY

15. Whatever their plans are once finding themselves in a local shelter, the migrants have one thing in common: they do not like Tijuana. The Binational Center for Human rights released in June a scathing report accusing the Tijuana municipal police of abuse, extortion and arbitrary detention of migrants. Its findings are backed up by reports from shelter workers who say migrants routinely report being forced to pay municipal police money to avoid detention. Salvation Army volunteers say that many of the migrants are scared to leave the shelter in the mornings, even though they are supposed to go find work. Father Kendziernski finds the police's actions surprising because migrants usually only have a small amount of money on them. He believes the municipal police harass migrants as a way to discourage them from settling in the city. Or, perhaps, they are just an easy target. Municipal police aren't the migrants' only worry. Four migrants' bodies were found in the desert near Tecate June 15, killed by five armed bandits. State police have arrested three suspects, who they believe were involved in a number of other robberies and murders of migrants.

PERILOUS JOURNIES

16. Migrants may be down on their luck, but the traffickers they hire appear to be doing a booming business. Carlos notes that for many of the deportees, their second trip across the border will be more difficult than their original one. A few years ago, migrants crossed near the San Diego/Tijuana corridor in a one-day trip. Now, migrants must make the trip further east for a three-day journey through a harsh desert climate. Carlos says the price for the trip is rising. The lowest rate he has heard of recently is \$1500, and Father Kendziernski thinks the average is closer to \$2000. Still, Carlos says, the journey from Baja California is cheaper than in the states bordering Arizona and Texas, where polleros and migrants know that, if caught, they will be held in U.S. detention facilities for several days before being deported, whereas in California most are taken to the port of entry for repatriation within hours.

17. Shelter workers do not expect any decrease in the demand for their services in the near future. The state of Baja California and municipality of Tijuana signed an agreement on March 31 with the Mexican federal government to provide assistance for migrants. Shelter workers say federal representatives met with them over a month ago, but since then, they have heard nothing and received no resources. Father Kendziernski does not believe the federal government's programs are sufficient to make much of a difference in migrants' prospects.

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